

Athalsteinn Ingolfsson

Towards the Sublime...

I first came across the prints of my friend Ryszard Otręba at the Graphics Biennale in Florence in 1972. I remember that I was greatly taken with them and consulting my notes from this period I find myself remarking on Otręba's "powerful compositions and unusual technique" as well as the "particular Polish character" of his work. Now, six years later, with an experience of Poland and Ryszard's friendship, I feel that I am in a position to elaborate and perhaps improve, on these comments.

From a purely formal viewpoint, Otręba's prints are indeed vehicles of great "power" and their strength as compositions lies chiefly in the artist's "centripetal" method of working. His images (or "signs" as Otręba likes to call them) are clearly defined structures, usually placed in the centre of a given field so that they cannot fail to engage the eye of the viewer immediately and with maximum impact. This kind of composition can be very effective but it can also be very static, with a message that quickly exhausts itself. Immediate readability – these are the qualities that some of the best poster-artists aim at. But Otręba's plaster-prints are vibrant, full of visual tension which the artist creates, mainly with a skilful orchestration of lines: the broad ones are brought across thin lines, waves of lines are swept across the paper, broken into clusters and rejoined to form solid shapes, light and shadow. We turn to these 'signs' again and again, experiencing new sensations every time. And all the time the artist manages to make the process look utterly natural and easy.

One could go on and point the two formal tendencies that dominate Otręba's prints as a whole: geometric precision on the one hand (as in "Początek XVIII" of 1968 and "Iniekcja" of 1973) which gives us some idea of the gifted designer Otręba is. Then there is the biomorphic approach, found in some of his most recent works ("Inicjacja I" of 1973, for instance) where a central idea is mind thoughts of 'growth' or a "life force" – a tumult of some kind. Then there are the prints where these two aspects are fused into magnificent structures that exude a feeling of confidence and a delicate strength: "Drugie lato Mateusza" of 1973 and "Horyzont", 1968. One could invoke the obvious contrasts, the scientific idea versus artistic intuition for instance and eventually one is faced with Nietzsche's dualities: the Apollonian versus the Dionysian. The two should coexist in the well-balanced personality.

Technically, Otręba's prints are a marvel, for the art of the plaster-print is unusually difficult and time-consuming, due to the brittleness of the dry plaster block.

Now the Americans call it the "Otręba-method".

Otręba's drawings are yet another aspect of his artistic personality, more intimate and lyrical than his heroic-size prints. Nevertheless, one sees in them an identical structural intelligence at work.

It is possible to continue this discussion of Otręba's art in formal terms, but it would only take us part of the way towards an understanding of his work. Which brings me to its "Polish character". It seems to me that Polish graphics on the whole thrives on a special kind of expressionism: dramatic, often brutal contrasts abound, the atmosphere is sombre and the content frequently has fantastic, even grotesque, overtone. Surely this must be a reflection of the suffering that the Polish nation has had to endure in this century (and previously), particularly during the war years. It would be unnatural if this suffering were *not* to surface in contemporary Polish art, – and in turn it gives it an urgency which is lacking in the arts of many other European countries, which seem more and more to devote themselves to arid technical experiments in the arts. Otręba's prints are indeed full of elemental contrasts, darkness and light, birth and destruction. But whereas the awareness of the tragic side of experience seems to overwhelm certain Polish artists, causing them to relive the horrors of yesteryear, albeit in a metamorphic way, Otręba's work transcends the tragedy and presents us with an attitude which ultimately has its roots in the Northern Romantic tradition of artists like Friedrich, Van Gogh and Munch. His "signs" turn out to be the age-old symbols for the world of the spirit and sublimity: the circles, the monoliths, the flames. Thus Otręba rises above raw reality and triumphantly affirms his belief in the creative spirit of man which has sustained him through all the centuries of suffering.

In this I find Ryszard Otręba's prints perpetually relevant, as well as some of the most satisfying aesthetic structures created by any graphic artist in Europe today.

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